



Futureland 24
Mumbai, 2010, Nuno Cera

crafting urban imaginaries: how does the photographer's record of the urban environment influence a way of seeing that is useful for an architect's response to place?

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This dissertation aims to examine how a photographer's way of seeing urban landscape is communicated in photographic works and interpreted by its audience, in order to discuss how photography can be used as a tool to analyse the urban environment for architecture and city planning. This essay explores the relationship between viewing and the viewed, visual culture and collective perception, static snapshots and a rapidly changing urban disposition. By unpacking philosophical notions surrounding the viewing of a photograph, such as subjectivity, ontology, aesthetic theory and hermeneutics, this investigation evaluates fundamental principles behind how we see the world and explores how we can be manipulated or influenced by photography to apply these principles to urban design concepts and strategies. The impact that photography has had upon societies' development as well as the moral and ethical weight it may carry, is scrutinised. Research has been drawn from theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Howard Becker and Ignasi de Sola-Morales to form arguments which are applied to the works of contemporary urban photographers. Nuno Cera and Stephen Gill are such urban photographers with contrasting methods and motives, whose depiction of the urban environment illustrates the advantages and limitations of photography as an analytical tool for urban intervention.

keywords Photography, Subjectivity, Urban design, Urban analysis, Architecture, Aesthetics

introduction: urban photography & urban analysis

A photograph is often received by its viewer as a factual statement. It is a statement ever waiting to be disproved. A photograph can be trusted in this way, regarded as visual evidence rather than artistic expression, because it depicts the precise likeness of a reality in one particular place at one particular time. Photography activates a relationship between viewer, photographer and subject, delicately composed such that a particular perception of place and its character is received by the viewer. The architect-viewer will intend to derive from the photograph what is 'important' about a place to conceive designs which ultimately shape its future.

Thus, how useful is the photographic medium as a vessel for communicating the 'essence' of a site and its surroundings, to inform design strategies that resonate with this 'essence' and successfully integrate within it?

The vessel through which these questions are examined is that of photo-series by Nuno Cera and Stephen Gill; particularly their respective projects *Futureland* and *Buried*. I discuss how the content and composition of their photographs affect the impression of place, focusing on the issues of subjectivity and morality. Given both architecture and photography's intimate connection with the visual identity of urban fabric, photography has not only the potential to be evidence of the urban socio-economic condition but also to become its most profound critic¹. What a photographer sees and decides to express has implications for architects who conceive the aesthetic of the city so comprehensively documented by photography, on a local or global scale.

photography: subjective interpretations and the impact of presentation

Our subjective interpretation derives from our individual ontological condition confronted by the preoccupations and observations of the photographer and the aesthetics by which he conveys them. Hence, artistic means of representation appeal more strongly to our personal, emotional and deep-rooted experiences of our being in the world, than do statistical representations such as bar-charts, forging a more profound and emotional relationship between photographer, viewer and referent². Far from subjectivity becoming a hindrance to correct interpretation, it empowers the photograph to convey more than it was originally produced to show.

Yet how accurately can a conscience, studying a moment outside the moment itself, understand or relive it in its complete metaphysical essence? When experiencing a place first-hand, countless elements feed into photographers' senses subconsciously, such as where a shadow falls ahead, or the distant city skyline making them feel small³. Benjamin describes this as "the unique phenomenon of a distance"⁴, comprising the 'aura' of a moment. Aura arguably derives from the precise moment the image is captured by the camera, where the distance between photographer and referent is absolute and the photographer's way of seeing it at this moment is crystallised. The photograph's reproducibility, however, negates the existence of an 'authentic original' photograph and the act of observing a moment through a photograph at a different place and time destroys the 'unique phenomenon of distance', viz. its aura⁵. Unique subjectivities originating in the differing subconscious of artists and photographers incessantly combine to shape society's collective perception of physical environment.

To explore the nature of this shaping of perception, we can ask how accurate a single photograph, and the tangible details and subject-matter therein, are as vessels for translating the aura of place and time into a reproducible artefact, to communicate the

crafting urban imaginaries: how does the photographer's record of the urban environment influence a way of seeing that is useful for an architect's response to place?

photographer's subjective experience of the moment⁶. How is a viewer's subconscious led towards certain interpretations of the photograph, encouraged to actively draw conclusions and make criticisms based on what is seen?

Cera's depiction of a Jakarta graveyard (**f1**) presents a place tinged with emotion; humanity and its perpetual grieving for lost ones. However, we barely have time to pause for thought before the skyscrapers impose themselves into the image-frame. We cannot see the edges of the graveyard but it appears surrounded by the megacity, the highest building cropped at the top to emphasise its dizzying height and imposing presence. Such ambiguity as to the physical extents of what we observe in the picture creates a sense of disorientation, an uneasy tension between the two contrasting subjects. This characteristic of the moment, communicated thus to the viewer, forms an aspect of the aura witnessed by Cera.



f1_Futureland 15

Jakarta, 2010, Nuno Cera

The outcome of individual photographers' recording of a place depends upon their own subjective encounters with it, and as such an infinite number of photographic interpretations of a place and time are possible. As a 'nomadic photographer'; Cera covers nine megacities across the world, fusing them into a single global urban entity, neither inhabiting the city nor claiming to have studied what it means to do so⁷. Conversely, Gill's emphasis in *Buried* is on immersion in a particular, familiar place; on the poignancy of neglected niches and the attraction of found objects. It is these micro-scale characteristics of Hackney Wick that form a photo-series which rues rapid changes to its landscape as the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) prepared the site for the London 2012 Olympic Games⁸. He buried and later exhumed the photographs, so that they became dirtied and distorted by chemical reactions between the photograph's pigment and the post-industrial soil chemistry, which according to Campkin, "emphasises process, chance, and a subjective and intimate understanding of the area's qualities prior to its possession by the ODA"⁹. The essence of his work draws heavily upon personal memories and sentiment; Gill is not an alien in his landscape, as Cera is alien to the cities he records.

Gill's ontological attachment to the place triggers an instinctive method of selecting that which is 'worth recording', a personal psycho-geography. Conversely, Cera's psycho-geography conveys a perceived aura of the megacity stemming from his disorientation due to its dizzying size and intangibility. Echanove and Srivastava propose that the megacity is witnessed in the "quick blur occurring when we switch our attention from one image to the other"¹⁰, as we are taken from the centre of the urban hubbub straight to an elevated

view of vast suburbia. This is demonstrated when comparing **f3 y f4**. In the former, a Cairo street, one wonders how to escape. Cera does not present us with an elevated view, we are rooted to the ground and blind to anything other than our immediate surroundings as if negotiating a labyrinth. Our means of escape is suggested by the tyre tracks ahead; travel on foot rendered futile by the boundless nature of the megacity, as though the last person has already sped away by car. In **f4**, we look out from a rooftop in Mumbai. Half of Cera's compositional frame is devoted to the immediate concrete jungle before us, a dilapidated array of housing blocks. Two-thirds of the way up the picture, the distant city appears, ghost-like in its hazy presence, yet its form resembles that of a tsunami; terrifying and ruthless. An event is created, that of the megacity approaching like an all-consuming tidal-wave. Echanove and Srivastava describe viewing Futureland as 'like looking through a lens that cannot quite capture its object and keeps on trying, going micro, macro...'¹¹ and a vast array of varying 'personalities' of the megacity are presented at breakneck speed.



f2_Buried

London, Hackney Wick, 2010, Stephen Gill

In each limited edition of his book *Buried*, Gill invites the reader to bury a pristine photograph¹². Thus the project is engineered such that similar emotions will resonate within both photographer and viewer. Whilst the photos are reproducible the 'aura' of the photograph lies in the burial and exhumation of the physical artefact, its unique material deformation creating an authenticity which Benjamin proposes 'makes no sense' in photography¹³. Gill finds a way to return the relevance of an 'original' to photography by adding a physical dimension to the relationship between viewer, photographer and referent. What is the event in Gill's work; the physical deformation of the photograph or the scene depicted? Hence Gill manages to separate photograph and referent in giving each distinct meaning¹⁴, and divorces from the photograph the totalising influence of his own subjectivity, allowing instead natural processes to alter the appearance of the image without his conscious intervention. The subject of his photographs generally combine as a series to convey the characteristics of Hackney Wick and the nature of its inhabitation by locals, whereas the physical deformation of the photograph comments on the 'sanitised' regeneration proposed by the ODA which replaces the natural bioremediation of a post-industrial area¹⁵.

crafting urban imaginaries: how does the photographer's record of the urban environment influence a way of seeing that is useful for an architect's response to place?



f3_Futureland 11

Cairo, 2010, Nuno Cera

We have so far found the relationship between viewing and the viewed to be one instigated by subjectivity, driving the constant interplay between the shaping of our physical environment and how we perceive and experience it. As a tool for informing architectural intervention, photography can play an active role in influencing our response to place and stimulating opinions about what creative injection is needed within the city fabric to catalyse successful regeneration. It can also reveal the impact that architectural intervention can have upon the human consciousness, the dynamic of the surrounding urban fabric and the perceived 'mood' of the area within which it is inserted. Aside from its impact upon our subjective responses, Barthes describes a "delicate moral texture"¹⁶ inherent in photographs, an analysis of which would further our discussion of photography's usefulness or limitations as a design aid.



f4_Futureland 24

Mumbai, 2010, Nuno Cera

morality & socio-political commentary

A moral dimension is imposed immediately upon a subject simply by virtue of it being photographed. Something about the scene has been considered 'worthy of recording' by a photographer and he/she has made a conscious decision to communicate it to the masses. This chapter addresses ethical issues inherent in photography, such as whether a photographer intervenes in controversial social realities, how photography may beautify injustice and the role of mass-media in shaping collective ethical standpoints.

Due to mass media we barely have time to critically interpret what we see, as we are constantly surrounded by the visual arts. Hence, photography finds itself needing constant renewal, 'to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision', as articulated by Sontag¹⁷. Urban documentary photographers record 'ordinary' lives and places, but can challenge our mass-media driven preconceptions by capturing them in surreal and provocative ways.

This 'alternative reality' is demonstrated in Cera's Cairo street (**f3**) challenging our expectations of the megacity through surreal composition. The quiet emptiness of these streets is haunting and sublime; unexpected in the most densely populated environments on Earth. As the Cairo street diminishes towards the vanishing point of the image, implying infinity, the housing's homogenous forms and colours condense the individual houses into an indistinct blur. The streetlights indicate a functioning infrastructure but seem surreal and arbitrary, mocking the street's lack of human presence and individuality. Cera's deliberate recording of this surreal, unexpected scene through a particular vantage point, speaks of Sontag's notion of *'violating ordinary vision'*¹⁸.

Despite how unimaginably populous these cities are, Cera presents them as empty, restricted places, where individual freedoms are smothered by standardisation of aesthetics and economically driven politics of land-ownership. Is it therefore possible for photographers to remain politically neutral in their documenting of cities, or to define their art as an act of non-intervention? According to Sontag, 'the person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene'¹⁹. Society and its visual makeup, an urban fabric which may reify social imbalances or injustices, are concretised into photographs that we may study and criticise²⁰. Despite the fact of the physical existence of the referent conveyed, Barthes' assertion that photographs disseminate 'the fact of being this, of being thus, of being so'²¹ is contested by the introduction of a moral complexity which brings to the image shades of controversy.



f5_Futureland 3

Shanghai, 2010, Nuno Cera

crafting urban imaginaries: how does the photographer's record of the urban environment influence a way of seeing that is useful for an architect's response to place?

For instance, the sheer scale of *Futureland* comments upon the 21st century urban disposition. **f5** focuses on the city's development and infrastructure, a series of boundaries emerging from the built environment and repressing freedom of human inhabitation. The diagonal trajectory of the viaduct highlights speed of movement and implies infinity in its direction. A person stands at the base of a viaduct support, a pedestrian alien in a vast motorcar-orientated environment. She stands distant from a person sitting at the base of another concrete column, their positions apparently defined by the imposing structure as if they were completely submissive to its control. All seems to move around these two people who presumably belong to the adjacent low-rise neighbourhood, ignoring them – are we to pity them as their neighbourhood is engulfed by the housing blocks soaring above it, incomplete but already dominant? Despite the immensity of what it depicts, the picture is suffocating²². Cera uses photographic technique to make a clear comment about the capitalist-driven state of urban development.



f6_Buried

London, Hackney Wick, 2006, Stephen Gill

Gill's *Buried* takes a similar stance regarding land-ownership and development in a capitalist environment, yet its execution stylistically contrasts with *Futureland*. This project portrays the intimate and interdependent relations between man, industry and a diverse ecology threatened by aggressive repossession and regeneration of land²³. Most poignantly, the burial and resulting chemical staining of Gill's photographs unambiguously state that Hackney's 'natural bioremediation following the closure of heavy industry, is being destroyed in favour of a sanitised biodiversity that better fits a "managerial, neoliberal image of the good city"²⁴. Campkin remarks that Gill 'highlights value in interstitial spaces and familiar things'²⁵. Such spaces recall Sola- Morales' *Terrains Vagues*, obsolescent, empty sites left abandoned outside the city's productive system, which 'subjugate the eye of the urban photographer'²⁶. Attracted to their strangeness, he detects their contribution to Hackney's post-industrial physiognomy and is thus driven to capture their distinct character²⁷. Sola-Morales theorises upon the metaphysics of architecture in his essay, proposing that it transforms the fallow into the productive, the void into space [...] striving at all costs to dissolve away the uncontaminated magic of the obsolete²⁸. Gill strives to capture this magic in such spaces, reacting against the 'clean' aesthetic of top-down planning which homogenises city districts.

A further ethical issue inherent in photography is that of beautification, a danger of its apparent fusion of visual arts and social commentary. Sontag highlights the limits of photographic seeing from an ethical standpoint, as she writes of “ethics of seeing”, which “alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at”²⁹. Cera’s technical mastery allows us a glimpse into his emotional response; see for example **f7** where he shoots a ‘portrait’ of a slum in Jakarta. The slum itself is precariously thrown together; Cera captures the textures, the shadows and contrasts upon the slum-building, sensitively portraying the beauty in its imperfections. The house is thus distinctly three-dimensional against the desaturated greys of the megacity towers behind it. On one hand, it is as if the city is a homogenising machine intent on erasing any sign of individuality emerging from its fabric, and on the other Cera’s imagery implies the dominance of middle-to-upper class capitalists over the slum-dwellers of the city.



f7_Futureland 8

Jakarta, 2010, Nuno Cera

On the surface, it seems controversial in the architectural field to ‘glorify’ slum conditions at the expense of pristine architecture³⁰. However, Cera seems to react against standardisation and homogeneity in his photographs, glorifying not poverty, but city fringes doggedly resisting globalisation and retaining their cultural identity³¹. The emotional sensitivity in the slum portrayal makes a statement by skillfully guiding our perception towards a certain conclusion.

To conclude, Benjamin seems to lift the ethical weight of ‘beautification’ from photography’s shoulders in writing that “the spirit that has mastered mechanics turns the most exact results into parables of life”³². He suggests that photography can teach us a great deal about life, allowing us to criticise and therefore respond to what we see and act to improve society.

crafting urban imaginaries: how does the photographer's record of the urban environment influence a way of seeing that is useful for an architect's response to place?

conclusion: reflections on architectural practice

This dissertation has examined how photographers see our urban environment, how and why they may communicate their experiences of it and how it is received and interpreted by its audience. To conclude, I shall draw together my analysis of the way of seeing a city through the photographic lens and talk of its relevance to architectural practice.

We have examined numerous aspects of photography which, when applied to architectural practice, feed into micro-scale issues such as its usefulness regarding meticulous and sensitive site-analysis, as well as the much broader questions of collective perceptions of city-dwelling and social consequences of urban planning. The ease of reproduction and dissemination of photographs in a globalised world leads to our imaginations of place becoming constructed in advance of us being there³³. Top-down planning often employs cartographic methods of site-analysis and whilst this serves well to inform objective, practical concepts, the distinct aura of a place can be disregarded. Careful studying of skillful, investigative photo-series such as those of Cera and Gill which convey the essence of a place through timing, lighting and vantage point, immerses the viewer in places of varying scales, providing vast quantities of information about the area through selective fragments³⁴. This can enlighten the architect as to what it is to dwell in these places, the impact which imposed architecture or infrastructure has had on these areas previously, what lends the place its magic and preserves its heritage, to properly enrich design strategies with profound metaphysical embeddedness in their site. They provide us with the means to step outside of the mass-media circulation which dominates and determines contemporary visual culture and show us 'alternative realities', drive our preconceptions in new directions such that architects and planners can be more inspired and informed to apply something new to the urban system³⁵. On a moral level, ethical decisions about 'what people want or need', which often blanket areas of urban regeneration, are encouraged through photographic criticism to be place-specific, applied and revised according to micro-scale urban situations. We see the city as pockets of real dwelling places, as opposed to a mass urban sprawl.

Lastly, photography's immanency in today's 'digital age' means its influence upon architecture's conception can be greater than ever. In the present, photographers such as Gill and Cera see urban transitions, the shape of society's present structure and human relationships therein; hence they speculate upon the future laid out for us by decisions and acts in urban planning. Do the decisions of the past or present mean we are heading towards a dystopia or a utopia? For the masterful urban photographer, the past and future are embedded in every portrait of a place. Each place recorded is thereby assigned the photographer's respect, and has immortalised its timeline, continuum and unique story.

endnotes

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977), 88.
2. Howard Becker, *Telling About Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 57.
3. Becker, *Telling About Society*, 57.
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (London: Harper & Row, 1982), 219.
5. Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproduction", 219.
6. Ignasi de Sola-Morales, "Terrain Vague", in *Naturaleza y Artificio: El Ideal Pintoresco en la Arquitectura y el Paisajismo Contemporáneos*, ed. Iñaki Ábalos (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2009), 123.
7. João Pinharanda, "The City As Fiction", in *Futureland: Nuno Cera*, ed. João Pinharanda and Julia Albani (Lisbon: Babel, 2010), 8.
8. Ben Campkin, *Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture* (London: I.B Tauris, 2013), 149 – 162.
9. Campkin, *Remaking London*, 151.
10. Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava, "Futureland and the Global Urban Blur: Theorising the Work of Nuno Cera", in *Futureland: Nuno Cera*, ed. João Pinharanda and Julia Albani (Lisbon: Babel, 2010), 16.
11. Echanove and Srivastava, "Futureland and the Global Urban Blur", 15.
12. Echanove and Srivastava, "Futureland and the Global Urban Blur", 15.
13. Benjamin, "Mechanical Reproduction", 220.
14. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 4.
15. Campkin, *Remaking London*, 156.
16. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 11.
17. Idem, 99.
18. Sontag, *On Photography*, 99.
19. Idem, 12.
20. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 11.
21. Idem, 5.
22. Pinharanda, "The City As Fiction", 9.
23. Becker, *Telling About Society*, 156.
24. Idem, 156.
25. Campkin, *Remaking London*, 157.
26. Sola-Morales, "Terrain Vague", 125-126.
27. Campkin, *Remaking London*, 156.
28. Sola-Morales, "Terrain Vague", 130.
29. Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.
30. Idem, 78.
31. Pinharanda, "The City As Fiction", 10.
32. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography", in *Screen 13* (1972): 24.
33. Sola-Morales, "Terrain Vague", 124.
34. Becker, *Telling About Society*, 35.
35. Sontag, *On Photography*, 87.

crafting urban imaginaries: how does the photographer's record of the urban environment influence a way of seeing that is useful for an architect's response to place?

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CV

Nia Rodgers. A recent Masters graduate from the Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, UK, I have engaged with design briefs from distinct theoretical backgrounds and am now seeking to progress my career in Architecture, continuing to explore design problems with an emphasis on reviewing and challenging design convention. I am committed to probing the dialogue between architecture and the arts, engaging in research into aesthetics, sociology and philosophy as a foundation for innovative approaches to architecture and design. Currently I reside in Warwickshire, UK, and have previously worked as an architectural assistant for Studio Amita Vikrant in London and Romero & Schaeffle Architekten in Zurich.